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ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN EGYPT: U.S. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

CORE COURSE ESSAY

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"There is no organized Islamic peril. The problem is not religion, but the unacceptable behavior of some individual groups and regimes."

Tim Worth, U.S. State Department Spokesperson¹

Islamic fundamentalism is frightening to many Americans. It immediately draws reminders of the American hostages in Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini, and the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York. The terror invoked by these images leaves Americans feeling threatened, powerless, and uncertain of how to stop the violence.

But are Islamic fundamentalists terrorists or freedom fighters? Do they offer economic prosperity and political enlightenment or social regression and political repression? Why are people, particularly in the Middle East, so attracted to Islam as more than a religion; as a form of Government and way of life? And what should the U.S. Government do about it, if it should do anything at all?

The Egyptian Government of President Hosni Mubarak is currently battling Islamic fundamentalism. They believe so called terrorists are disrupting Egyptian society, inflicting economic devastation, and planning to overthrow the Egyptian Government in the name of Islam. They have adopted tough rhetoric and harsh actions to check the violence and punish the perpetrators, but they have also taken actions to support and promote the teachings of Islam in order to appeal to the religious moderates.

The United States supports the Government of President Mubarak. We also advocate conflict resolution, and stability and peace in the region. But the Egyptian Government says this is not enough. As our friend and ally, and importantly, as the first Arab nation to make peace with Israel, they expect increased public support for their actions, less emphasis on human rights, and more money to help them through the difficult economic changes occurring in Egypt.

¹Myles Gordon, "Is There An Islamic Threat?" Scholastic Update 22 Oct 1993: 11.

This paper will discuss Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt; specifically, who and what the Islamic fundamentalists are, the policy and actions of the Egyptian Government in response to the threats of the Islamic fundamentalists, and the United States reaction and current policy on Egypt. Recommendations for improvements to U.S. policy will also be provided.

Islamic Fundamentalists in Egypt - Who and What are They?

In its broadest sense, Islamic fundamentalism represents a religious revival - a reaction against the perceived lapse of religious observance in the modern world. This lapse is often attributed to Western influences, which some Muslims believe have corrupted traditional values, and led to a rise in greed and government corruption. To counter these influences, many Muslims have returned to the fundamentals of Islam, observing the Koran more closely, donning traditional Islamic clothing, and in some cases, protesting against non-Islamic influences. The majority of Muslims in these movements seek peaceful, democratic means of change.²

There is, however, a far more militant strain of this revivalist movement - radical groups that, in the name of Islam, resort to acts of violence. They seek to upset the established order of government and give rise to an Islamic revolution.³ In Egypt, Islamic fundamentalists promise a purer society, free of outside influences and the corruption and poverty that have plagued them for centuries. But while the society envisioned by the fundamentalists sounds peaceful enough, their tactics are not.⁴

Although there are many Islamic fundamentalist groups in Egypt, most are subsets of the three primary organizations: the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Group, and the al-Jihad.

²Phil Sudo, "The Faith and the Follower," Scholastic Update 22 Oct 1993: 5.

³Sudo, 5.

⁴Stephen Hubbell, "The Rise of Radical Islam," Scholastic Update 22 Oct 1993: 9.

The sixty year old Muslim Brotherhood claims to be a non-violent organization whose goal is to see Egypt governed solely by Islamic law. It appears to have a widespread following among religious Egyptians who are searching for alternatives to what they see as government policies that have failed to deliver prosperity or social justice.⁵ Although outlawed since 1954, the Muslim Brotherhood is currently seeking legal status as a political party so as to challenge the Egyptian government within the framework of the Egyptian constitution. It is widely believed, however, that legalizing the Muslim Brotherhood would be a mistake for two main reasons. First, they lack specific economic, political, and social programs other than that represented by their slogan, "Islam is the solution." Second, there is concern that if members of the Muslim Brotherhood are elected to public office, they would abolish Egypt's multi-party political system because it does not strictly abide by Islamic law. It is feared they would not only destroy the very system that put them in power, but Egyptian democracy as well.⁶

The Islamic Group was born about two decades ago as the student wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. By the mid-1970s, the Islamic Group turned against the Muslim Brotherhood because it believed the Muslim Brotherhood had become corrupted by involvement in Egypt's political system. Instead, it joined forces with the al-Jihad.

The Islamic Group condemns the government of President Mubarak as one composed of infidels. It calls for an Islamic state that would turn against Western influence, end corruption, and impose strict Islamic law. Like the al-Jihad, the Islamic Group believes violence is the basic means for radical change.⁷

Its spiritual leader is Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, widely known for his alleged participation in the recent bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City.⁸ Exiled

⁵Caryle Murphy, "Egypt's Great Dilemma," Washington Post 15 Mar 1993: A15.

⁶Raniyah Sa'd, "MB Condemnation of Terrorism Discussed," Al-Ahram Weekly 22-28 Apr 1993: 2 (JPRS-NEA-93-069, 25 May 1993: 51-52).

⁷Halah Mustafa, "Expert Analyzes Extremist Organizations," Al-Hayah 29 Jul 1992: 8 (JPRS-NEA-92-125, 24 Sep 1992: 8).

⁸Chris Hedges, "Islamic Group Has Grown From Splinter to a Thorn," New York Times 1 Apr 1993: A6.

militants, including the brother of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's assassin, are described as members of a scattered, self-appointed leadership council.⁹

The Islamic Group has established a broad base of support in southern Egypt and in the slums of Cairo. The organization has perhaps 10,000 full-time members, including some 800 Egyptian veterans of the war in Afghanistan. It spreads its message through a network of schools, clinics, Islamic charities and through fiery sermons in mosques.

The third Islamic fundamentalist organization is the al-Jihad. Although the al-Jihad went into hiatus after a crackdown by Egyptian security officials that followed the killing of President Sadat, the group has been reconstituted in the last few years with heavy Iranian backing (denied by Iran). Egyptian officials refer to the group as the New Jihad.

Its founder and leader is Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, a physician who was accused of involvement in the assassination of President Sadat, and has helped the Afghan rebels fight the pro-Soviet government in Kabul.¹⁰ Leaders of the al-Jihad absolutely reject democracy, and believe the West and Western civilization epitomize ignorance, infidelity, unbridled materialism, and criminal ideology.¹¹

Al-Jihad's primary objective is to establish an Islamic state in Egypt. Dr. al-Zawahiri has stated that al-Jihad's demands, as well as those of the entire Islamic movement, are as follows: the Islamic state will spread the faith of the one God; liberate Muslim territories, notably Jerusalem; revive the duty of jihad (holy war) to liberate Muslim lands; free the Muslim nation from economic subservience; promulgate virtue and Islamic morality; distribute wealth equally; establish social justice and foster social cooperation; end injustice to the deprived, poor classes; encourage learning and enhance the status of scholars; and honor religious courts that safeguard people's rights, defend their basic liberties in line with Islamic law, and prevent encroachment on those rights.¹²

⁹Caryle Murphy and Steve Coll, "The Making of an Islamic Symbol," Washington Post 9 Jul 1993: A1.

¹⁰Chris Hedges, "Militants Plan to Increase Violence, Egyptians Say," New York Times 19 Dec 1993: A8.

¹¹Mustafa, 8.

¹²"Paper Interviews al-Jihad's al-Zawahiri," Al-Arabi 22 Nov 1993: 3 (FBIS-NES-93-228, 30 Nov 1993: 13-14).

Al-Jihad is considered the most violent of Egypt's primary Islamic fundamentalist groups. It sees itself as a paramilitary group that must directly battle the Egyptian government. According to Western diplomats, the al-Jihad is trying to infiltrate the Egyptian armed forces, the foundation of President Mubarak's hold on power. Its members advocate violence including large-scale suicide attacks, which they call martyrdom. They argue that sacrifices must be made, even by innocent civilians, if an Islamic state is to be achieved in Egypt. This focus on violence gives al-Jihad a limited appeal. It does not enjoy the mass following of the Islamic Group.¹³

Democracy, diversity, accommodation - the fundamentalists have repudiated them all. In appealing to the masses who fill their mosques, they promise, instead, to institute a regime of Islamic law, make common cause with like-minded "brethren" everywhere, and struggle against the hegemony of the West and the existence of Israel.¹⁴ They also promise improved standards of living, prosperity, education, and jobs for all Egyptians. These promises attract the attention, if not the full support, of Egyptians struggling for survival, while simultaneously and deliberately demonstrating the failures of the Mubarak government to do the same.

Egypt and Its Anti-Terrorist Policy

So are Egyptians attracted to Islamic fundamentalism as a religion or as a new way of life and government? The answer is complex. It includes the economic, social, and political trends and events that have been developing at least since the Sadat Presidency.

Unemployment, underemployment, and poverty are paramount. There are simply not enough jobs to absorb the 400,000 to 500,000 people who enter the workforce every year.¹⁵ Those who do find jobs are often overqualified for the position, such as the

¹³Hedges, 19 Dec. 1993: A8.

¹⁴Martin Kramer, "Islam vs. Democracy," Commentary Jan 1993: 41.

¹⁵William E. Schmidt, "A Deluge of Foreign Assistance Fails to revive Egypt's Stricken Economy," New York Times 17 Oct 1993: I10.

custodian with a college education. Alaa Bakry, a 28 year old man who runs a motorcycle shop in one Cairo district, explains it this way: "Life has become very difficult. For example, when a guy comes out of university, he's 23 years old. He serves two years in the army, so he's 25. By the time he finds work he'll be 30, and to find an apartment" so that he might marry, "it'll be another 10 years. When is he going to start his life?"¹⁶

Many people flock to Egypt's cities in the hope of finding employment opportunities. But there are none, and this creates overcrowding and slums. Those frustrated enough, who possess the means to do so, leave Egypt to start their lives elsewhere.

The lack of jobs has lead to widespread poverty. One in every three Egyptian workers lives off an average income of less than twenty-five dollars per month.¹⁷ Additionally, as Egypt moves toward a free market economy, prices for basic products, including food, are rising. Those without a job, with only a low income job, or with a job whose salary does not keep pace with inflation, end up with lower standards of living. This results in a widening gap between the upper and lower classes.

Further, in order to obtain government services, the lower classes are forced to pay bribes, or special fees, straining their already limited financial resources. This then promotes widespread corruption within the Egyptian government, which in turn, decreases confidence in the government, including President Mubarak.

There's more. Half of Egypt is still illiterate.¹⁸ Those that get to attend college, usually require tutors to pass difficult exams. College and tutors are expensive. Islamic fundamentalists have set up free remedial classes and tutoring facilities to help students who need it. These students not only appreciate the help, but become convinced that Islamic fundamentalism is best for society because it succeeds in helping Egyptians where the government fails.

¹⁶Caryle Murphy, "Wide Egyptian Unease Abets Muslim Radicals," Washington Post 11 Apr 1993: A23.

¹⁷Schmidt, 17 Oct 1993: I10.

¹⁸Schmidt, 17 Oct 1993: I10.

The average Egyptian sees no way out of this downward spiral. They certainly don't see any help coming to them from the government. As a matter of fact, they view the government as the cause of most of their problems. So it's not surprising that Islamic fundamentalism, with its promises of economic, social, and political equality under only the law of God has so much appeal to them; particularly to the university students.

The desperation for some, however, has lead to acts of violence in support of an Islamic state and against the Mubarak government. President Mubarak considers these acts of violence to be terrorism. He believes that in order to solve Egypt's economic and social problems, he must first stop the terrorism. His policy and actions concerning Islamic fundamentalism focus on conducting an anti-terrorist campaign, appealing to the more moderate Islamic people, and instituting economic reform.

First, the Mubarak policy focuses on a tough anti-terrorism law that requires the death penalty for convicted terrorists. Additionally, defendants accused of extremist violence are tried in military rather than civil courts. This speeds up the judicial process. The government has also brought Egypt's 170,000 mosques, more than eighty percent of them privately run, under government control.¹⁹ Further, by bombarding the public, through the government controlled TV, radio, and press, with sensationalist news and commentaries about the terrorist activities of the extreme fringe of the Islamic movement, the government seeks to brand all those who contest its policy on the basis of an Islamist ideology as extremists.

The second part of the government's policy is to appeal to moderate Islamics by adopting the militant's own religious rules to fend off the extremists. For example, Egyptian television has drastically increased religious broadcasting, and religious censors pore over new books looking for insults to Islam, which, if found, would prohibit publication. Also, political leaders now make a point of going on hajj, the pilgrimage to

¹⁹Murphy, 15 Mar 1993: A15.

the holy city of Mecca, whenever possible, and bringing along a TV crew.²⁰ In addition, the Egyptian parliament routinely examines proposed legislation for its compatibility with Koranic law.²¹

The third part of Mubarak's strategy includes implementation of difficult economic reform. Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United States, in the last few years Egypt cut its budget deficit from about twenty percent of gross domestic product to below three percent, brought inflation below ten percent, stabilized its currency exchange rate, reduced excessive consumer subsidies, and removed controls on interest rates, helping to bolster cash reserves to an estimated \$11 billion. Egypt then agreed to another phase of economic reforms to include promoting private business, liberalizing trade, and overhauling and privatizing state-owned companies. The reward is debt forgiveness; \$3 billion in non-military debt owed the Paris Club of creditor nations plus \$10 billion in loan write-off was forgiven for the first phase, and another \$3 billion in debt forgiveness for the second.²²

Additionally, since 1978, the United States Agency for International Development has spent \$858 million on local development programs in Egypt, most of it on water, sewer, and transportation projects in rural areas.²³

Many secular Egyptians have argued that the only way to deal with the Islamic religious threat is to allow it to take its natural course; that it has nothing to offer and will fail if it does come to power. On the other hand, Islamic fundamentalists claim the government's anti-terrorist actions are those of a police state, not a democratic one. They accuse the government of torturing prisoners, condoning judicial injustice in the military courts, and using overwhelming force such as several hundred men, heavy machine guns,

²⁰Hubbell, 11.

²¹Rae Corelli and Stephen Hubbell, "The Dangers Within," Maclean's 30 Nov 1992: 28.

²²Schmidt, 17 Oct 1993: 110.

²³William E. Schmidt, "The Villages of Egypt Relish the Fruits of Peace," New York Times 24 Sep 1993: A4.

and rocket-propelled grenades in nighttime raids on suspected militant havens.²⁴ But President Mubarak believes Egyptian terrorism warrants a tough response. In an early 1993 interview, he told the Washington Post, "Democratic freedom we never touch!"²⁵ He believes economic and social reform can only occur once terrorism is brought under control, and he intends to follow that plan.

United States Policy

Although many would argue that Egyptian President Mubarak has chosen to combat violence with the authoritarianism of military strength, the United States supports him. Still, Americans, who are now focused predominantly on U.S. internal and economic affairs, wonder why we care about Egypt at all. Since the Persian Gulf War, there have been few Middle East concerns for the average American. In fact, many would prefer we take care of our own problems, before we look to help any other country, including Egypt.

But Egypt is important to the United States for several reasons. First, President Mubarak helped forge the Arab coalition against Iraq in the Persian Gulf War. He has also helped temper some of the region's less predictable rulers, such as Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya and President Hafez al-Assad of Syria. Second, Egypt is the only Arab nation that has a peace treaty with Israel. Further, President Mubarak has served as a bridge between the Palestinians and the Israelis.²⁶ Third, the fear exists that if Egypt, the most populous country in the Arab world, were to fall into the hands of militant Islamists, the political psychology of the whole region would be transformed. Fourth, and most important, Egypt is the cornerstone of United States policy in the oil-rich Middle East.²⁷ The United States today imports two million barrels of Arab oil a day, quadruple the level of eight years ago. One out of every eight gallons of gasoline Americans put into their

²⁴"Egypt's War With Militants Is Spreading," New York Times 1 Apr 1993: A6.

²⁵Murphy, 15 Mar 1993: A15.

²⁶Chris Hedges, "As Egypt Votes on Mubarak, He Faces Rising Peril," New York Times 4 Oct 1993: A8.

²⁷Jeffrey Bartholet, Carol Berger, and Melinda Liu, "A Wave of Terror All Their Own," Newsweek 30 Aug 1993: 14.

cars comes from an Arab oil well. As long as Americans live on imported oil, we have to care about Middle East peace.²⁸

Except for a recent relaxation of U.S. insistence that the Egyptian government ensure the human rights of all its citizens, our policy has been constant for the past few years. Our broad policy goals for the Middle East include establishing and maintaining real peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors and the Palestinians, enhancing security and deterring or defeating aggression, helping to protect the world's economic security, promoting economic and social justice, and promoting the values in which we believe. Specifically:

- we seek close and enduring relationships with those countries with which we share fundamental values,

- we seek viable security arrangements, which will assure stability and unimpeded commercial access to the vast oil reserves of the Middle East,

- we support human rights, pluralism, women's and minority rights, popular participation in government, and reject extremism, oppression, and terrorism,

- we differ with those, regardless of their religion, who practice terrorism, oppress minorities, preach intolerance, or violate internationally accepted standards of conduct regarding human rights,

- we differ with those who substitute religious and political confrontation for constructive engagement with the rest of the world, and

- we differ with those who would pursue their goals through repression or violence.²⁹

Recommendations/Conclusions

Egypt's problems are clearly complex. A single solution does not exist that would satisfy the Egyptian government, the Egyptian people, the Islamic extremists, and the

²⁸Gerald F. Seib, "As Peace Calls, Egypt's Meaning to Clinton Grows," Wall Street Journal 8 Sep 1993: A14.

²⁹Edward P. Djerejian, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, "The U.S., Islam and the Middle East in a Changing World," Meridian House, Washington, D.C., 2 Jun 1992.

United States. There are, however, some actions the United States can take, within its existing policy, to continue to support President Mubarak, as well as to guide him toward social, economic, and political stability in Egypt.

First, it is important to realize that the problem is not Islamic fundamentalism. Islamic fundamentalism is only a symptom of Egypt's greater social, economic, and political ills. The quality and standard of living for the average Egyptian has deteriorated to the point where he or she sees no way out. So, Islamic fundamentalism is viewed as salvation. The Egyptian government needs to change this mindset by renewing the faith of the Egyptian people in its ability to care for their social, economic, and political needs. Although they have started down the path of economic reform, these changes take time. In addition, transition to a free market economy is painful, as demonstrated by Egypt's unemployment, underemployment, and widespread poverty.

The United States needs to reaffirm its support for the Egyptian government financially. The key to supporting Egypt is to provide sufficient financial assistance to ease the pain of economic change; thereby decreasing the temptation of Islamic fundamentalism, while simultaneously averting the image of President Mubarak as an American puppet. In addition, financial support for Egypt need not be unilateral from the United States. If we can enlist the support of other nations with similar interests and concerns in Egypt, such as those of Western Europe, Canada, or Japan, there is likely to be greater support from the American public than if we attempted to be the only source of financial aid.

Second, we should encourage the Mubarak government to aggressively pursue open dialog with the Islamic fundamentalists. This would force radical groups to present detailed plans to improve the very aspects of Egyptian society they criticize, or to accept the ideas of others, including the government. All Egyptians would benefit from this process. Most importantly, radical fundamentalists would learn that ideas can be more powerful than guns.

Finally, since President Mubarak has asked for decreased emphasis on human rights, we should respond positively. This does not mean that we should forsake our quest to ensure human rights worldwide, but rather that we relax the rhetoric for a brief period to allow President Mubarak to address the problem of terrorism in Egypt. This is particularly important because President Mubarak believes that he cannot improve Egypt's social, economic, and political problems until the terrorism of the radical Islamics is under control. Although as Americans believe we have a moral obligation to stand up for human rights worldwide, there are times when we must step back and allow other governments to make decisions that they believe will achieve long term democratic objectives. As our Civil War demonstrated, even the United States is not without scars in its struggle for a free and democratic society. In fact, many would argue that such a struggle continues to this day.

In conclusion, we need to demonstrate to our strongest Arab ally, that we will be there to help when asked. Many times in the past, especially in periods of relative stability, we have failed to respond to requests for help; only to regret our inaction later. Unfortunately, we tend to respond in times of crisis, rather than to look ahead and take actions to avoid that crisis. The actions, or lack thereof, we take regarding Egypt, will either reinforce our reputation as a world leader, or contribute to the decline of U.S influence and prestige on the world stage.

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